

Ivaldi: Book 2 Chapter 4

The King's Birthday Feast

The ladies left the harem on two occasions per year: the king's birthday and the Festival of the Blue Moon. On the king's birthday, they feasted with the king and his courtiers, each of whom brought his own wives. The king particularly liked to show off those of his wives who were pregnant, and his many children, in proof of his continuing virility. It was also an opportunity for the lords and their ladies to look over the king's daughters as prospects for their own sons to marry, the women's opinions in the matter being more valued than their husbands would ever admit.

On Badaksha Khan's fifty-fifth birthday, Ashkvan was twenty-two and I sixteen. Ashk had not noticed that I was growing up, and no other men ever saw me. But at the king's birthday feast, Tash-ur-Zarul noticed.

Tash had probably been looking forward to seeing me at the feast, intending to point me out to his friends and remark on my temper and my magic powers, to ensure that none of them would think of marrying me. He saw me across the hall, where I stood inconspicuously in the shadows, hiding as best I could from curious stares.

Tash's tongue went into action. Touching a friend's shoulder, he pointed and said, loudly enough for me to hear, "Ah, there's the girl, the witch's brat. I could tell you some tales about that one-" I turned to glare at him, and he shut up abruptly.

"Tash? What were you saying?" His friend elbowed him. I turned away.

"The witch's brat. A sorceress. She has magic powers," he finished lamely.

Tash was right to suspect bewitchment, but it involved no special powers beyond a wild, burning beauty. A witch he would have thought her, yes, or one of those enticing demons sent by the gods to befuddle men's senses and steal their souls. I could imagine nothing more beautiful than Teja at sixteen - except Teja today. Her red hair, falling past her waist. Her eyes, wells of pitch to trap a man's heart and drown it. Her body would have only recently begun to mature, curve of breast matching curve of hip, with long, slender legs visible through the folds of her robe as she walked. It was easy to imagine her at sixteen; she apparently had not changed much since.

I had no idea of what was to come. I had seen him and turned away in disgust, afraid that he would torment me, and that this time I would not

be able to break his nose for it. I clung to the wall, fervently wishing for the feast to be over. This was even worse than the harem, being out here in the crowd where everyone seemed to be staring at my hair and murmuring about my mother. Tash hovered constantly at the edges of my vision, ogling me while trying to appear not to. I could not identify the look on his face; up to that time I had never seen raw lust.

As Tash sidled around the room trying to get close to me, his father Jaimil came up and clapped his son on the shoulder.

“Found yourself a wife already? You are a quick hunter.”

Tash turned glazed eyes to his father. “I’ve got to have her,” he said in a strangled undertone. Jaimil glanced where he pointed, then, astonished, back at his son.

“Isn’t that the girl who broke your nose? The witch’s brat?”

Tash nodded. “And now you want to marry her? Have you no pride? You’d be a laughingstock! They’d all say she beat *you*.”

“But Father, *look* at her.”

There was a silence while Jaimil looked. I stared in another direction, but I was rigid with concentration, anxious to overhear the words I hoped I would not, condemning me to marriage with Tash. After a pause, Jaimil said doubtfully, “Do you think you could handle her, son? She might have powers.”

“She’ll never again dare use them on me. I’ll teach her that.” This threat was uttered for my benefit, and I heard it.

At the banquet table, I felt Tash’s eyes on me throughout the dinner. I concentrated on my food, letting my hair screen my face. I was relieved when the ordeal was over and I could return to my tower.

After a few days, Jaimil-ur-Zarul spoke to Badaksha Khan. The king offered more suitable daughters; as a second cousin, Jaimil’s son was entitled to a choicer fruit of the royal loins, but Tash and Jaimil were adamant. Badaksha probably welcomed the unexpected chance to rid his harem of this last vestige of dangerous magic. He was also well aware that Jaimil was a supporter and close adviser of Vanaksha. In Jaimil’s house and under his control, I might be a useful weapon against Ashkvan. That Badaksha was willing to let me go to Jaimil was an indication of his feelings about the inheritance - or so ran the court gossip after the engagement was announced.

But first Badaksha visited Heir-Mother Gulana to inform her of the betrothals of several of his daughters. Her maidservants were present, so the conversation, word for word, soon made the rounds of the harem.

“Respected Senior Wife,” said Badaksha in his most sonorous announcement-of-royal-decision voice, “the Feast of the King’s Birthday has had the happy result that we shall soon be celebrating the births of more of my royal descendants. Rosana shall marry Zalim-ur-Tanjul, Alora is betrothed to Zerban-ur-Vamoon, Tash-ur-Zarul has asked for Teja’s hand, and Valina will marry Thorhan-ur-Ziyad.”

Gulana inclined her head graciously. “My lord, I see no objection to any of these marriages,” she said. Badaksha sighed in relief; apparently Gulana had not seen the political motive for Teja’s marriage, had not seen the blow aimed at her son.

“However, my lord, in the case of Teja there will be some delay,” Gulana added sweetly.

“And why should there be?” Badaksha shouted.

“My lord, she is not yet a woman.”

Badaksha was puzzled. “Not yet a woman? Well I should hope not! It’s for her husband to make her a woman.”

“Of course, my king, in the sense that you mean it. But I mean that she has not... bled yet.”

“Oh.” Badaksha hesitated, not wanting to discuss so disgusting and dangerous a topic out loud. “Are you sure? She must be fifteen years old - rather late in starting, isn’t she?”

“I am sure. In fact, I was just discussing it with Lady Miramy the other day. She is the oldest girl in the harem who has not begun. But it is not too unusual; some are simply later than others. Perhaps it’s her foreign blood.” Gulana seemed pleased to be the bearer of this bad news.

“Are you sure she will bleed? It’s not some sorcery?”

“Oh, I think she will, my lord. She has developed rather rapidly in recent months. She will catch up with her sisters shortly. But, as you know, it would be dangerous for Tash to wed her until then. The first blood is very potent, and must be dealt with by those who know how to contain its power. Jaimil’s household could be tainted if her first blood comes in the marriage bed.”

Badaksha waved his hand to silence her; he did not want to hear the details. It was bad luck for men to know too much about women’s magic. “Very well, we will wait. But she must be married as soon as she bleeds.”

“I see no reason not, my lord.” Gulana bowed her head, and Badaksha strode out.

When he had left, Gulana sat for some time thinking. She had not missed Jaimil’s motive in this, and she was concerned for possible

effects on Ashkvan. But perhaps she cared a little for me as well, and certainly she knew that marriage to Tash would be terrible. He was rumored to be cruel to his horses and servants, and would treat his wives no better, particularly a wife for whom he bore a grudge, as well as an obsession. My immaturity forced a delay, but the marriage would take place, and Tash's temper would only be worsened by waiting. Gulana summoned me to tell me of my fate.

When the betrothals were announced, the harem was shocked that I was to marry at all - and to Tash? He was considered a good catch, and there were mutterings about dark magics used to ensnare him. I was horrified. At the betrothal ceremony I could see in Tash's twisting face the new lust and old hatred which drove him. He seized my hand fiercely, possessively, and stared as if he would devour me. He had been informed that we could not marry immediately, and it drove him to a frenzy. I welcomed the reprieve, of course, and prayed to whatever goddess there was that I might never bleed at all.

Tradition had it that betrothed couples might meet in the harem gardens to get somewhat acquainted. Usually there was not much time wasted between betrothal and marriage, only enough for two or three such meetings. These "garden walks" were always chaperoned, but usually by young peers who gigglingly ignored whatever the young couple got up to - betrothed was almost as good as married, after all.

I could not refuse to see Tash, however much I dreaded his visits, and he was the most ardent suitor the harem had seen in generations. His friends, our "chaperones," made sure to take a sudden interest in the flowers when Tash forced me against a wall to caress me.

I had long since become aware of the desires of my own body, at least as vague, warm feelings which I sometimes imagined some man would someday bring to flower. Tash was not that man, and it was all I could do not to vomit at his attentions. I felt defiled every time he pawed me, and always hurried to bathe afterwards.

The Festival of the Blue Moon was halfway round the calendar from the King's Birthday. This tradition was borrowed from the Vandáli, along with their blue-skinned god, though the Meshvid do not celebrate the festival as uninhibitedly as do its originators. Still, we women were permitted out of the harem, even allowed to roam unescorted about the Palace to join the feasting and dancing.

I would gladly have stayed in the tower that night, but Tash demanded my company and I had to go. There were no chaperones during the Festival, and Tash took every liberty. I fled to the main hall, where I sat in the front row of seats to watch the dancers, hoping Tash would

not dare touch me in public. He sat down beside me, pulling his chair close. After a few moments, he crossed his arms, and his hand crept from under his arm to stroke slyly at my breast. I turned away, leaving him only my shoulder to paw, which he did until I was near to screaming.

I did not know that Duvalye, Ashkvan's tutor, had been invited to the Feast; it was one of those invitations he could not avoid, though he had managed to be away from Meshvir for the King's Birthday. He told me later that he first felt my anger, then saw my hair.

"Felt your anger?" I asked.

"It was part of his... powers. He formed bonds with those he loved, and was able to feel their feelings, to know where they were and what happened to them. But I did not know it then. I had never even met him. Ashkvan told me only that his teacher had noticed and asked about me. Later, Duvalye described the scene to me.

"Who is that?" he asked Ashkvan, distracted from their discussion of land reform.

"My sister, Teja." Ashkvan's tone was not as dismissive as it might have been, speaking of a mere woman.

"You have a number of sisters," Duvalye observed. "Is this one special?"

Ashkvan nodded. "But I'd rather not discuss her now," he said softly.

Duvalye nodded in turn; they would have privacy later. Ashkvan held to certain Meshvid proprieties, among them that one did not talk about one's female relatives in public. This was part of the reason he had never before mentioned me to his teacher; men simply did not talk about women, particularly their own women, and never to strangers and foreigners.

Duvalye respected Ashkvan's feelings, but he could not keep his attention on the conversation. My rage was as clear to him as a red banner waving above the crowd. Tash seemed unaffected, but Duvalye felt certain that the boy was the cause. He wondered why, and what would come of it. It was so distracting that Duvalye finally led Ashkvan out to a corridor, and subtly but quickly came back to the subject of me. Ashkvan told him the whole tale, from my magic-cursed birth to the present ugly situation, not omitting the unwomanly feelings I had expressed to him about my dear betrothed.

"Everyone thinks she keeps so quiet around him out of shyness, but it's not that at all! She hates him, and dreads the day she will have to marry him. I really fear what she may do once they are married. He is cruel, and will stop at nothing to subdue her. He has been waiting his

chance ever since she broke his nose. If she resists him, he may kill her.”

Duvalye knew even better than Ashkvan that my silence had nothing to do with shyness. But, as he later told me, my desperation did not seem to him suicidal. He said there was a flame in me - small, uncertain, but nonetheless determined - and that I was meant for greater things than slavery/marriage to Tash-ur-Zarul. We have yet to see (*she said with a light laugh*) what those greater things may be, but I have reason to be grateful that Duvalye thought so.

Their talk turned to more answerable questions. The Crown Prince grappled with the problems of his kingdom-to-be, but, while Duvalye advised him, his own mind was more concerned with this red-haired woman and the fate which had thrust her into his path. He knew he could not leave me to rot or die as the wife of Tash-ur-Zarul, and it was not long before he told me so in person.